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This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:
Raffaella Baccolini, Ira Torresi (2019). The Dark Side of Cleanliness and Order: Visual Renderings of Oppression in Dystopian Science Fiction Cinema. New York : Routledge.

Availability:
This version is available at: https://hdl.handle.net/11585/701423 since: 2020-05-23

Published:
DOI: http://doi.org/

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12 October 2024

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in *Law, Cinema and the Ill City* (Anne Wagner and Le Cheng eds) on April 30, 2019, available online: https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9780429442254/chapters/10.4324/9780429442254-3.

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The dark side of cleanliness and order: Visual renderings of oppression in dystopian science fiction cinema

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1. Once upon a time, (not so) far away: *another space* in utopia/dystopia

Concepts of space and displacement are central to utopian/dystopian studies. The very word 'utopia' comes from Thomas More's 1516 eponymous work. More coins the word by combining the Greek *ou-topos* (no/not place) and *eu-topos* (good place). Thus, utopia is the good place that does not exist, whose primary characteristic is "its non-existence combined with a topos – a location in time and space – to give it verisimilitude" (Sargent, 1994, p.5). It can therefore be defined, quoting Michel de Certeau, as a "spatial practice" (Pordzik, 2009, p.18).

As the genre developed to include the variations of dystopia and science fiction that are our focus here, however, space in utopia ceased to be associated only with a remote, secluded geographical other. Since the publication of Sébastien Mercier's *L'an 2440* (1771), the separation of utopia from the present has also been temporal: utopia may not just be geographically distant, it can also be projected into the future. Such feature has also been acknowledged by Fredric Jameson (2007, p.313), when he called for an exploration of the distinctive elements of science fiction as a genre that included time and space. This change in the treatment of 'utopia' eventually allowed scholars to move away from mere discussions about utopia's unreachability to the notion of utopia as process, which best accommodates more recent 'what if' utopias or dystopias that do not seem to differ much from the intended reader's or viewer's own time and space. The use of such alternate realities is especially frequent in the genre of the 'critical dystopia', which "with its disasters and representations of worse realities, retains the potential for change, so that we can discover in our current dark times a scattering of hope and desire that will arise to aid us in the transformation of society" (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003, p.235).

When the elsewhere is transposed to the screen, it is spatialized and visualized through techniques and resources that strive at verisimilitude (Dante, 2002) and help viewers experience the reality depicted as close to their own 'here and now', involving their subjectivity in the filmic meaning-making process (Camera Obscura Collective, 1976). Thus, the way in which urban and domestic spaces are visualized in dystopian movies and TV series substantiates and embodies the conceptualization of an alternate reality at the same time as it contributes to the viewers' engagement in the story. In the following section we will discuss in particular how pristine and well-ordered urban spaces that initially seem to convey positive values of lawfulness and morality can eventually be denounced as loci of hegemonic oppression. Conversely, slums, decrepit or otherwise undesirable areas that at the start of the movie appear as 'sick' parts of the city, become associated with the politically and legally oppressed.

2. Spatializations of dystopia

Dystopian space can function in a variety of ways: as Samuel R. Delany (1991) has stated, the setting or background in 'realist' fiction becomes, in science fiction, the foreground, one of the essential elements of the narrative. But whether utopian or dystopian, the imagined elsewhere also shares a pedagogical function as the presentation of another world or space allows viewers "to perceive the world they occupy in a new way, providing them with some of the skills and dispositions necessary to inhabit an emerging social, political, and cultural environment" (Wegner, 2002, p.2).

2.1. Dystopia and the city

Across utopian/dystopian film genres, the city is one of the chief embodiments of the (often abstract) superordinate institutions that rule over citizens' lives. Imbued with this role, it comes to visually and spatially represent the 'elsewhere' that lies at the very heart of utopia/dystopia.

One movie that plays on the ambiguity of borders in utopia (protection) and dystopia (asphyxia) is M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village* (2004). Here, a community lives in what appears to be 19th century Pennsylvania, in a village called Covington. Woods populated by bloodthirsty, red-clad creatures, called 'Those we don't speak of', surround the small town. The creatures are kept off by means of a wooden palisade with manned watchtowers, animal sacrifices left outside the palisade, and a body of rules. Red is forbidden; in the village, it does not even have a name but is called 'the

bad colour'. Villagers are not allowed to go out of the boundaries of the village or its immediate outskirts. Consequently, crossing the woods to reach the surrounding towns is forbidden, even to get medication (the film opens on the funeral of a child who has died of a preventable disease).

When the chief elder's blind daughter Ivy volunteers to go to the towns in order to fetch medicines for her beloved one, who has been stabbed by Noah, a mentally disabled fellow villager who is in love with Ivy, she is however allowed to try. Her father reveals her that there are no 'Those we don't speak of'; the elders impersonate them in order to stop their children from leaving the village. Ivy, however, does meet and kill one of the monsters in the woods. Only the viewers can see that the creature is in fact Noah, who has found a costume in the shed where he was locked after his murder attempt, and escaped to find Ivy. And only after the girl climbs over a wall do we (not Ivy) find out that the village is remote from our own reality not in time, but in space. A bewildered present-day ranger helps her get the medication she needs, and she goes back to the village believing she has met a town-dweller of her own delusionary time, and killed a real monster. Given that Ivy's partial witness of the journey unwittingly confirms the village's collective delusion, the elders (actually a group of intellectuals who founded the village as a supposed utopia in the 1970s) decide to leave things as they stand. Thus, the village can resort to its fake rules that have the only function of preserving the public order and stifle any doubt or question about the village's way of life. Utopia is revealed as *anti*-utopia, mainly because it does not succeed in its intention – keeping violence out of its borders; and partly, because the strict enforcement of arbitrary law excludes any possibility of natural social evolution and the freedom of choice that is fundamental for the realization of utopia.

The visual rendition of borders in *The Village* does not only rely on the two walls encapsulating Covington – the wooden palisade between the village and the woods, and the concrete wall between the woods and late 20th century Pennsylvania. Colours are also paramount in visualizing the dichotomous divide between lawfulness and unlawfulness, good and evil, and danger and safety. We have mentioned that red is 'the bad colour' because it is associated with the monsters – the marks they leave on doors, the meat they receive as offerings, and their cloaks, are all red. As an antidote to red, the elders promote yellow as 'the safe colour'. Members of the watch, as well as Ivy when she sets out on her mission, don yellow cloaks as a sort of uniform. The two types of cloaks, however, look similar in design and cut, differing only in colour. The visual effect is one of a game of some team sport, one side wearing red, the other yellow. Cross-contamination of the two sides is carefully avoided: although the red berries that abound in the woods around Covington are delicious, villagers uproot and bury any shoot of the berry shrubs as soon as it appears within the village, lest the colour attracts the creatures. Reds and yellows also appear saturated and contrast with the rest of the

desaturated, less bright hues of the setting, thus adding reality or relevance to the cloaks (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996, 172).

Despite the multiple boundaries erected around Covington, however, the spaces within the village itself appear rather undifferentiated. In conformity with the elders' egalitarianism, all houses appear to enjoy equal spatial rights. This appears to contrast sharply with the cityscapes of more typical dystopias, which tend to be larger and more divisive.

The organization of dystopian public spaces often mirrors "a set of culturally influenced and historically changeable spatial relations" where hierarchies of classes and cultures are spatialized (Hartmann, 2009, p.275). For example, the philosophy and the spatial organization on which the new world order is fashioned may serve to maintain inequalities – in other words, the dystopian city planning presupposes a hierarchical division of space according to economic and social status. The spatial organization of the city in gated communities, or rich suburbs versus poor slums, carries exclusionary versions of citizenship (Holston and Appadurai, 1996). The "spatial distribution of hierarchical power relations" also accounts for an "active criminalization of urban poverty" (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992, p.8; MacLeod and Ward, 2002, p.163), thus reaffirming moral stereotypes about slum dwellers as social and/or ethnic groups that are inherently more prone to crime. In their turn, such stereotypes reinforce arguments against the social advancement of marginalized groups, in the general perception that they deserve being kept in check by strict law enforcement. The parallel with real-life colonial and hegemonic practices of disparaging the oppressed is self-evident. In this respect, dystopian slums become the very embodiment of difference from the mainstream, 'bodies of difference' that metonymically stand for the bodies of the marginalized groups inhabiting them (for 'embodied difference' and 'bodies of difference' in cyberfeminism, see Wilding, 2010, p.23). In critical dystopian fiction, however, the status quo of social and power relations is depicted as immutable, and it is literally cast in the very stone of the city. Trespassing on the borders of one's allotted place in the city will inevitably be prosecuted as a crime on public order, as will be discussed below, after section 2.2. The narrators' critique of current society becomes apparent when the viewer is confronted with the violence of such prosecution in the 'what-if' alternate reality, which almost invariably appears to be disproportionate in its ferocity.

Set in 2010 Johannesburg, South Africa, Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009), for instance, opens on several views of a slum. It is a vast camp of small, run-down cubic shacks with corrugated iron roofs, surrounded by a concrete wall topped with barbed wire and guarded by the army. It does not appear to have green areas, squares or any other public space; its streets are not paved but are scattered with rubble and rubbish dumps. The very name District 9 rings the bell of segregation to South African ears, an echo of Cape Town's District Six, which was forcibly evacuated of all its non-

white population in the 1960s. In the filmic fiction, District 9 is the government camp housing the population of an alien spaceship stranded to Earth. Johannesburg's human population sees the aliens as parasitic addicts (their drug being cat food) and derogatorily calls them 'prawns', after their resemblance to a South African bug. In news footage at the start of the film, 'prawns' are shown wreaking havoc to human occupations (damaging railways, pillaging rubbish bins, scaring people in the streets outside their district), ensuring their collective presentation as inherently lawless. Criminal activities such as prostitution, animal fights, cat food and alien weapon trafficking flourish in the district, managed by armed Nigerian humans. As a result of such unrest, a private military corps is entrusted with evicting the aliens from their shacks. In the first part of the movie, several aerial views from the military's helicopters ensure a top-down angle that conveys the impression of the viewer (and the soldiers) having power over the prawns' territory, keeping it under check (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996, 146-148). Throughout the eviction scenes, the point of view remains the humans' subjective angle, ensuring that the viewer's emotional involvement is with them rather than the outlanders, only to shift sides as the plot unfolds.

The spatial organization represented in Rodrigo Plá's *La zona* (2007) visually rests on the opposite order/disorder, but its narrative reveals that corruption unsentimentally applies to villain and victims alike. The story takes place within an ordered, clean, and 'nature-tamed' gated community known as La Zona, protected from the disordered, dirty, and 'nature-wild' areas on 'the other side of the wall'. La Zona is home to a group of privileged citizens in Mexico City, who live under their own rules. Thanks to their influence, the residents have obtained a special status that gives them self-regulatory rights, including legal exemption from police entry if they do not have a proper warrant. The opening shot brilliantly pans over the perfect neighbourhood: immaculate individual homes, until the camera rises above barbed wire to reveal the slums beyond – a grey, overpopulated area with houses assembled on top of one another. However, the impression of righteousness and order is soon replaced by the feeling that the gated community is actually a million-dollar prison with its high walls, barbed wire, 24/7 CCTV, security guards, and passes needed to enter or leave the neighbourhood. When a group of youngsters breaks into La Zona, the appearance of order and virtue collapses and the community is revealed in all its corruption. Discovered by a resident, the trespassers kill her and are in turn confronted by the neighbours turned vigilantes, who take the law into their own hands shooting down two of them, accidentally killing a security guard, and starting a paranoid manhunt for the third young man, Miguel. But when a city cop shows up, they maintain there was no incident, as committing acts of violence would make them lose their special status. There is an eerie balance between the seemingly utopian characteristic of the gated community and the corruption at its core.

What is initially presented as a visual metaphor of pristine perfection reveals instead tremendous violence and corruption brought about by fear, paranoia, and the assertion of entitlement.

Conversely, the city on the other side of the wall is from the start associated with poverty, crime, and corruption. The narrative does not underplay the thieves' criminal intentions, nor are the police portrayed as effective and honest. Unlike *District 9*, however, the police, represented by the well-intentioned cop Rigoberto, initially seem to intend to 'protect' the disadvantaged teenagers. But the system is tainted on both sides of the wall and Rigoberto is forced to drop the case. The only sign of belated empathy is shown by Alejandro, the son of one of the residents, who once he realizes that the fugitive needs to get out of La Zona if he is to remain alive starts also questioning the values of the community. Although Alejandro will not manage to protect Miguel, his *pietas* allows him to retrieve Miguel's corpse from the garbage and bring it to a cemetery to be buried. As he drives away from La Zona, another family is shown to be moving out: there is no place for dissent in the gated community.

Delusive as we, the viewers, may come to judge it, the kind of utopia embodied by the gated community in *La zona* is an extremely powerful drive for Lacie, the main character of Black Mirror's *Nosedive* (E1S3), that exemplifies how the division of dystopian cities embodies a supposed 'urban hygiene' that divides the good from the bad.

2.2. Private spaces and dystopia

Nosedive is set in a future in which people rate each other from one to five stars through a mobile phone app, and instantly see ratings through an eye implant. One's chances in life, from housing to medical treatment, all depend on their rating. An unexpected chance comes for Lacie when Naomi, a long-lost friend (who actually used to bully her), now a top-rated socialite, invites her to her wedding. Lacie's flight to the wedding, however, is cancelled and she has to reschedule hurriedly, collecting bad ratings and finding herself in debasing situations. Naomi calls to tell her not to show up but Lacie eventually reaches the wedding, in tatters and distressed. As a result of her intrusion and delirious (although liberatingly honest) speech, her rating falls below one, which marks her as a social outcast. Since she has held a knife to 'threaten' a childhood memorabilia, she is also imprisoned as a criminal. It is important to note, however, that Lacie's downward parable to abjection is not motivated by ambition *per se*, but by her wish to move to a better neighbourhood. By being seen at Naomi's wedding, Lacie hopes to get the extra points she needs to qualify for a discount to her otherwise unaffordable dream house, located in an uptown suburb. Her very hope to live far from the madding

crowd that she daily crosses paths with as she goes to work, and to move out of the small flat she shares with her brother, has the effect of dragging her into the gutter. The only way of escaping the delusion of gaining better status by moving uptown, then, is hitting the bottom and finding how liberating it is to stop depending on others' opinions.

Nosedive conflates issues of public and private urban spaces. If the spatial distribution of the city carries information about how power relations and social difference are institutionalized, private or collective spaces usually serve as metonyms of the social groups that inhabit them. They thus become a way to discuss how people understand themselves as part of a certain society or social group; how they relate to one another; how they might challenge mechanisms of authoritarian power, control, and/or exclusion. In the affluent sections of society, for instance, each house is its own 'privatopia' (MacKenzie, 1994) that allows for individualism. Conversely, in the densely populated slums such as those on 'the other side of the wall' in *La Zona* or inhabited by the 'prawns' in *District 9*, or the roaches' hideouts in Black Mirror's E5S3 *Men Against Fire* (henceforth *MAF*), there is little or no margin for individual or nuclear family space. In the latter two, in particular, even when the filmic action is set inside private houses, the viewer is initially exposed to one indistinct mass of individuals, all similarly different from humans. It is only in hindsight that the viewers are led to differentiate their own view from that of the law enforcers who penetrate the abide of 'the others'.

We have already mentioned that the 'prawns' in District 9 live on a government camp; although each individual or family lives in a small private shack, they do not truly hold property rights on it. When the government orders the camp to be relocated, 'prawns' can either sign a form and thus agree to be displaced, or they will be forcibly moved out anyway. A more extreme version of the same situation is *MAF*. The episode's setting is a dystopian future in which human mutants called 'roaches' after their revolting, zombie-like look, are hunted down by a special military corps whose soldiers have their senses altered by a neural implant. When the implant of one such soldiers, Stripe, is damaged, he suddenly becomes aware that the 'roaches' in fact look exactly like other humans, and their mutation is a minor one. Non-mutants, however, have outlawed mutants, who are deemed genetically inferior, in order to protect the human bloodline. Only Christian extremists house 'roaches', while the armed forces entrusted with their genocide sign in to have their memory and senses selectively modified through the implant in order to erase all doubts about the eugenic mass killing. What is our focus here is that private spaces where 'roaches' are forced to hide are not their own houses. Rather, they colonize unkempt places, without daring to clean them of rubble or make them more homely (which would give them away). Alternatively, they are hidden away by pious people who take the risk. In both cases, they live in the dark, in places unfit for human dwelling. The

outsiders, the abject (see section 3 below), the (allegedly) other-than-human, then, are deprived not only of all legal rights to private property, but also of fundamental rights, such as the right to life.

As we have seen, then, the geography of dystopian cities presupposes rigid boundaries that correspond to social divides. Trespassing on such boundaries equals to threatening the public order that in many dystopias has the main purpose of defending the social status quo. The act of trespassing may be a physical one – like breaking into La Zona, or crossing the woods in *The Village*. The prawns' riots at the start of *District 9* are also a very physical act that threatens the established boundaries. In this view, Lacie's sorry plight in *Nosedive* appears to be a sort of punishment that she deserves for her *hybris*, for wishing herself into a neighbourhood, and a social status, out of her reach. Lacie, like the other trespassers of the list, can be conceptualized as an intruder or invader of a space where she does not belong. Inclusion not being the *forte* of dystopian legal and social systems, their invasion sparks off a systemic aggression – with the exception of *The Village*, where Ivy's inability to eyewitness does not bear consequences on the status quo, and her act of trespassing has been authorized from the start by the village elders.

The case of *MAF* appears different. In terms of physical trespass, here the invaders are the soldiers breaking into the roaches' hideouts. We see them digging the creatures out of the dark recesses of the old buildings to kill them mercilessly. The narrative, however, seems to initially lead the viewer to think that the soldiers have every legal and moral right to do so – rather similarly to Noah's death in *The Village*, where Ivy's presumption is that she has actually killed one of 'Those we don't speak of' out of self-defence. Whereas *The Village*'s Ivy could not see Noah under the monster's skin, the soldiers killing roaches in *MAF* have their senses distorted by the neural implant. Unlike Ivy, who fears the violence that the creature/Noah is about to perpetrate on her, the soldiers' homicidal drive in *MAF* relies solely on the roaches' disgusting appearance. We are not told that roaches can be harmful; they are simply taken as a scourge of society, a menace to humankind, but this menace is revealed as mere genetic difference. Yet, it is this difference that is presented as an act of trespass – and it is further substantiated by their dwelling in dark, dilapidated, dirty places. This aspect will be examined in the following section.

3. Dirt and cleanliness as spatial metaphors of dis/order

In the movies and episodes analysed so far, the representations of public and private spaces as constituents of dystopia do not only imply a differentiation of social groups in the political terms of

hegemony versus minority explored above. There is a moral as well as visceral side to that very same ideological divide.

Metaphorically speaking, it is hard to escape the classical equation between moral virtue and cleanliness, on the one hand, and depravity and dirt, on the other hand. This holds true for both people (individuals and groups) and the places they inhabit, which in their turn also metonymically stand for their dwellers. According to Mary Douglas (1966/2000), the deepest motivation to clean oneself and one's home is to exert and keep control over oneself and the world. Dirt, then, stands for what does not have a proper place in one's idea of self and the world, or refuses to stay in place: "if we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter *out of place*" (Douglas, 1966/2000, p.36, our emphasis).

Dirt, however, is not only misplaced matter. It is matter that should not be 'there' not in the sense that it should not be in the place where it is found – a whole cake left out of the fridge for a few hours does not qualify as dirt, despite its increased germ levels. Dirt should not exist at all, or should be removed as soon as it appears (like a cake smear on a dress). This urgency is motivated by the feelings aptly emphasized by Ben Campkin in his reading of Douglas: "dirt is ambiguous and anomalous, causing *anxiety* by *disrupting* classification systems and the 'normal' ordered relations through which one understands the world" (Campkin, 2013, p.49, our italics). It is "*threatening* because it does not have a proper place in our classification of things" (Campkin, 2007, p.69, our italics). Dirt is "matter *dangerously* out of place" (Connor, 2011, online, italics in the original). In her essay, "Pollution" (1975), Douglas further explores dirt's ability to *violate* boundaries and trespass onto what is clean (or morally ordered), soiling it. Dirt, then, appears as the embodiment of all things unruly, things that will not stay put, reject, undermine or overthrow an otherwise well-functioning order; it carries a threat of aggression to our very value structure. It can be thus identified with "what disturbs identity, system, order", and thus triggers abjection – the feeling of horror and disgust that results in wanting the abject to be removed from oneself (Kristeva, 1982, p.4).

In the films examined here, the 'outsiders' (be it 'prawns', 'roaches', those living out of La Zona, *The Village*'s town dwellers, ratings system dropouts in *Nosedive*) are inherently 'dirty' or 'abject' from any non-relativist vantage point, because they have different values and abide by different rules (both hygienic and socio-cultural). Their 'dirt', one might argue, stems from their being 'wrong' – not only in their beliefs, but in their very existence ('they should not be there'). Imposing allegedly objective 'urban hygiene' standards invigilated upon by armed forces, then, is more a way to erase disturbing difference than an instance of caring for the recipients' health and well-being. Far from being exclusive to filmed dystopias, the removal of marginalized populations from the urban mainstream happens in reality as well (see for instance Lichter, Parisi and Taquino, 2012). Still, in

the filmic encoding of allegedly 'hygienic' urban spaces and 'spaces of abjection', the clean/dirty dichotomy is made inescapably visible, thus foregrounding the metaphor and collapsing it onto the represented reality (Tommaselli, 1996, pp.159-160).

One of the early scenes of *The Village* shows two girls sweeping a porch and hurriedly burying a berry shrub – two hygienic practices that are important in keeping the village safe from outside threats, both in and out of metaphor. In the pristine suburb that *Nosedive*'s Lacie wishes to move into, as well as La Zona in the eponymous film, the use of white or pastel hues, diffuse public lighting, all seem to reinforce the idea of cleanliness and order conveyed by the pale ribbons of city roads. The visual lexicon of clearly outlined square volumes spells rationality, man-made order; the consistent use of straight lines also points to moral purity and righteousness (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996, pp.51-54). The world outside those enclaves is less bright, less ordered. In *La Zona*, the houses outside are painted in dark colours and stacked row after row up a hill, so that it is hard to outline them. In *Nosedive*, although straight lines and clearly defined volumes are also features of Lacie's working environment, the latter teems with people, similarly suggesting a lack of differentiation that suggests higher chances of contact.

When the setting is in destitute parts of the city, conversely, visual metaphors of abjection abound. Outside La Zona, the streets are dirty and messy, littered with broken objects, tires, wrecked pieces. Loose rubble similarly litters the streets of District 9 and the floors of the abandoned building where some of the 'roaches' in *MAF* hide. In *District 9*, the 'prawns' are also seen scavenging open-air garbage dumps and rubbish bins (and scattering what they do not need in the street). Most of them are smeared with blood from the raw meat they eat. Prawns' and roaches' living spaces do not contain any gleaming surface (except for hi-tech gear) or pristine white materials – even the house of the farmer hiding roaches has stained wallpaper and dark rugs on the floors. The contrast is thematised in *MAF*'s ending, when Stripe is standing outside his own home, which he sees through his implant as immaculate, surrounded by a tidy green lawn and complemented with a smiling dream girl in a white dress. The viewer, however, sees a greyish run-down house, covered in graffiti, in the midst of unkempt weeds in a decaying neighbourhood.

4. Conclusions: away from the elsewhere?

In dystopian cinema as well as reality, architecture is capable of overcoming the Cartesian dichotomy between mind and body, and truly embodying mental processes, making it possible to experience them through one's senses (Fausch 1996). In the movies we have analysed here, the urban or living

space is more than a mere backdrop but metonymically embodies the entire dystopia it exists in. Whether leaving the dystopian city or space is presented as a possibility, then, equals whether there is any hope of escaping the dystopia at large. This happens to different extents across our small sample.

As with the group of 'true' utopians in Ursula K. Le Guin's "The ones who walk away from Omelas", in some of these movies there is hope of escaping the delusively clean, lawful, well-ordered but oppressive systems that rule over dystopian cities. The possibility of an escape may be relatively uncontroversial, such as when the dissenting characters in *La Zona* simply move out. Apparently, the legal and social system of the dystopian Mexico City does allow such displacement when it comes from the hegemony. The clean, orderly part of society cannot be conceptualized as a 'contaminant', and unlike dirt, it is not threatening when 'out of place'.

Conversely, acts of displacement/replacement coming from the disadvantaged groups are more threatening and can succeed only as a result of criminal acts that may, however, be narrated as morally right. In *District 9*, the main 'prawn' characters illegally collect and process an activating fluid thanks to which they can ultimately operate the alien mothership's command module and reach their home planet. They do so in order to seek intervention against the humans who have tortured some of them during experiments, aborted their eggs, segregated and left them under the sway of human criminals – all seemingly legal acts. At the end of *Nosedive*, Lacie is similarly able to escape the oppressive ratings system thanks to her illegal conduct at Naomi's wedding. She is sent to prison, and since her ratings have fallen below the legal level, the eye implant that connects her to the system is removed. For the first time, Lacie is free to insult a fellow prisoner, who returns the favour, and both of them are exhilarated at such liberating use of verbal aggression.

The Village, however, turns out to be a more asphyctic anti-utopia. Ivy's father's revelation (he tells Ivy that there are no 'Those we don't speak of') is offset by Ivy's own experience in the woods, which unwittingly confirms the elders' collective delusion. In this case, destiny seems to run counter individual doubts about the righteousness of an artificially secluded, apparently egalitarian utopia that actually relies on power difference and information withdrawal. Several questions, however, remain open. After Ivy's successful mission, the other young villagers who wished to see the towns may decide to venture into the woods, dangerous as they are. In *MAF*, the sudden malfunctioning of the implant is too much for Stripe, who decides to have his memory erased and live on with his uncomplicated illusion of being on the 'right' side. The dystopian system's compensation for his decision, however, is also delusionary, and is once again visualized through a urban and living space in the episode ending (see §3 above).

Different as they may be in other respects, the films analysed here all seem to attach an ambivalent value to 'urban hygiene'. In each one of them, keeping urban and living spaces discreet, attaching to some of them values of cleanliness/respectability/safety/lawfulness vs dirt/abjection/danger/criminality, is a collective illusion and a sterile urban planning exercise. It only confirms that, in dystopia as well as reality, "'difference' is essentially 'division' in the understanding of many" (Trinh, 2010, p.187). In all the films we have mentioned, flows and contacts between different groups are presented as inevitable, even productive. The real illness and scourge of any city is the process of segregation and stratification that leads to the very emergence of decayed areas (metaphorically represented by *The Village*'s monster-ridden woods). Raising walls and calling on public order to stop the 'contagion' between (ethnic, social) groups is both pointless and potentially suicidal for the very foundations of the rule of law. Real utopia is not a physical or temporal enclosure that can be defended *a priori* by law enforcement. Rather, it is a dynamic process, a journey towards the common good. Whenever such process is stifled, whenever static utopia is artificially imposed and mapped onto the borders of a physical urban space surrounded by guarded walls, it invariably becomes dystopia.

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